[A Day with the Pattons]

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LIFE HISTORY

TITLE: A DAY WITH THE PATTONS

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Name of Person Interviewed Mr. Rob Pagett (white)

Fictitious Name Bert Patton

Street Address None

Place Lykesland, South Carolina

Occupation Rural Mail Carrier and Farmer

Name of Writer Mattie T. Jones

Name of Reviser State Office

A happy setting of circumstances caused me to be included among the guests of the Patton family one glorious Sunday in January. Their home, some seven miles east of Columbia, on State Highway number 76, is a six-room bungalow painted green, with ivory trimmings. The avenue leading about the distance of a block from the highway to the house is bordered on both sides by pecan trees. About over the yard are large liveoaks interspersed with cedars. The house is bordered with shrubbery, and to the left is a large plot of perennial flowers.

Of the four members of this rural segment of the Patton family, Sadie, a rather low, well-rounded brunette, who never elected to marry, is the C10- 1/31/41 - S.C.

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oldest. Martha, a tall, slender blonde, and also a spinster, is next in years. Bert, the head of the family, is of medium size and of dark complexion. He is some sixty years of age. Formerly, he was a mail carrier, but now, retired on a life annuity, he farms the fifty acres that belong to the place. He delayed marriage until two years ago, when he married Bobbee Baxter, a rural sweetheart twenty-two years old.

And the guests of that day were, besides the writer, a Columbia brother, Marvin, the oldest of all, and Olive, his wife. Adding to the pleasure of the day was the drive out from Columbia with Bert and Bobbee. The guest's car - well, it wasn't running that day. So Bert, true to form and character, came in and got us.

Miss Sadie met us on the portico to augment the kind invitation with her cordial welcome and to usher us into the glowing warmth of the living room, a cozy room, with oak logs burning in the brick fireplace. The furnishings were simple and tasteful. Over the mantel was a picture of Sir Galahad, done in sepia.

Miss Sadie, clad in a simple and becoming black dress, bubbled over with easy and charming animation as we circled about the fire. In the corner with the fire implements stood a sword-shaped piece of steel. “That was my fathers' sword,” Miss Sadie explained in response to me eyeing it. “He carried it in the Confederate War for three years. Funny place for it, but Bert put it there to hold the piece of paper in place till it can be stuck back on the wall. The maid seems to have used it for a poker this morning, and I'll use it for one now. One of these days I'm going to polish it and send it to the relic room in Columbia. My father has a manuscript there. Just before he died- when he was seventy - he wrote notes on his 3 soldier-boy experiences from memory. It was an interesting paper.”

“And this, Bert added, as he opened a drawer of a nearby secretary, “is the pistol Dad carried in his pocket all three years.”

“Listen, Son,” exclaimed Marvin, “don't point the thing in this direction; turn it the other way. It's the unloaded gun that shoots and kills, you know.”

“Yes, that's the reason I always keep mine loaded,” Bert answered. “And I've never shot anybody yet.”

“This piano is another one of our antiques.” Miss Sadie said. “It's way over one hundred years old, and still has a sweet tone. When my mother was born, my grandmother died, and my mother went to live with a Revolutionary soldier, a major, from Lexington County. He bought this piano for my mother when she was just a child.”

“Sadie, for goodness' sake, forget about antiques for a while,” Marvin urged.

“I'm wondering Mrs. Jones, if Bert pointed out to you any places of interest along the road as you came down,” said Miss Sadie, in the desire for a new subject. “He talks so little and drives so fast, I bet he forgot to point out Heathwood on the left as you come out of the city. That's one of Columbia's beauty spots. Lovely homes and gardens.”

“To begin with,” put in Marvin, “you came out on the Carners Ferry Road. If you haven't grown hazy on your South Carolina history, you'll recall that it's one of the oldest roads in the State. It is a part of the old Statesborough-to-Columbia road. Years ago, stage coaches carried mail and passengers from Charleston to the interior over the road. It's a beautiful highway now, and, in the spring, it's more lovely, with blooming plants 4 and grass on both sides.”

“The ruins of Millwood are visible from the road, too,” Miss Sadie explained. “The columns stand like sentinels to remind folks, like Marvin, that South Carolinians are still proud of the Hamptons.”

“That Veterans' Hospital is a handsome thing,” Marvin continued. “When the Government first started it, I thought the committee was a set of darned fools to build as big a thing as that, but I be-dog if it isn't running over with patients all the time. They've got 545 there now. That's one of the prices we pay for war.

“Christine, Pete, and Susan ought to be here today.” Marvin continued after reflective moment, “so as to make the family unit complete. Somehow we're too busy these days to think much of family unity. Maybe we're just too confounded indifferent. Those were good old days when we all answered 'present' to the family roll call. Well, reminiscing is a sign I'm getting old, I guess.”

As the writer later learned, Marvin is both the oldest boy of the family and a favorite. When he was six years old, he was laid low with typhoid fever. For days he lay emaciated and unconscious, almost lifeless. A distant cousin came regularly in the evenings, after work was done, and he and Marvin's parents went into the living room to pray for the sick child. One night, after prayer, he said, “Cousin Sallie, Marvin is going to get well.” At midnight the crisis came, and the child began to improve. There was also a second serious illness, when a local physician lanced an abscess on Marvin's liver and held the incision open with a disinfected sharpened stick.

Bobbee came in to invite us into an adjoining room where a delicious dinner was served. Here Martha, previously busy with dinner details, joined 5 our group. Bobbee, in response to various compliments on the dinner, especially addressed to her, remarked a bit deprecatingly, “Preparing a meal is no new experience to me. We had a big family and us girls took turns doing the work. We had lots of company. Huh, I was down home yesterday, and thirty-eight people were there for dinner. I've made a pretty good cook of Bert, too. We do everything together. You'd be surprised, though, how easy it is to get our meals. We raise most of our food right here on the farm. We have plenty of corn, hams, butter, milk, chickens, and eggs. We milk three cows now, and we raised a thousand

biddies here in the yard last year. And we always have a good garden of vegetables, winter and summer.

“It's a mighty good thing we can have plenty close to hand, or in jars in the pantry. We never know when Bert's going to bring in carloads of folks to eat. Christmas day, when the table was all laid and dinner ready to serve, in came Bert with five little children whose mother had just died. They wouldn't of had much of a dinner, if Bert hadn't thought of them. Every now and then he picks up a load of children and takes them to Columbia to the Micky Mouse Club. Yes, it's open house here just like it is down home.”

“No use to worry,” the cynical Marvin retorted. “The President will feed you. I'm glad Congress has stopped some of this wild spending, for a while, anyway. He's thrown away millions of the people's money. Dad blame it all, I'm tired of it myself.”

“Now, Marvin, go slow,” admonished Miss Sadie. “I declare you've associated so much with that new millionaire son-in-law of yours and sold so many high-priced suits to rich people that you've learned to think their thoughts after them. Roosevelt's done lots of good and made things easier for poor folks. You must not 'speak evil of dignitaries,' you know.”

“And, Sadie,” said Martha, “you wouldn't speak evil of the devil himself, and you won't let any of us do it. You've always got some sort of an alibi. Did we hear the President's last speech! If it were broadcast, Sadie heard it. She's never missed a program since we had a radio. The other day she made a cake, put it in the stove, and sat down at the radio. She forgot all about the cake, And when I went to the kitchen to see what was burning, it was ruined, burnt to a crisp.

“Well, I don't see why a commonplace thing like a cake should interfere with a program of beautiful music like Nelson Eddy and Jeannette McDonald put on,” Sadie rejoined.

The meal over, a Negro girl, black as the ace of spades, with ivory white teeth, whiter still because of the contrast, came in to clear the table of dishes. Instead of a maid's cap, she had a modern bird's nest hat perched on the left side of her head. “Miss Martha, I wants to git a envelofe to mail a letter wid... No'm I can't read nor write. I can pick out some letters in the paper though...How old I is? No'm I don't know 'zactly, but I's 'bout fifteen. But I knows where I was borned, down in de old field... Dick, you git outer my way. You'll mek me broke dese here dishes o' Miss Bobbee's... No'm I ain't got no husband. Reckin I'd kill 'im ef'n I had one, ef'n he wouldn't treat me right... Yessum, I got two children, but dey bof dead, though.”

Miss Sadie explained Annie's position in the household by saying she comes in handy about bringing in wood, sweeping yards, and doing other heavy work about the place. “Sometimes we pay Annie, and sometimes we pay her to stay away. We try to keep her and Jack in clothes and shoes. We've just given her those new shoes she has on now. She and Jack were outcasts, and we took them for their sakes, rather than for ours. They both think the world of 7 'Cap'n Bert,' and of the rest of us, too, as for that. We couldn't be true to our tradition, if we'd mistreat the Negroes on the quarters. We're told that, after the war, our grandparents sold old treasured keepsakes, one by one, in order to keep an ex-slave comfortable. Then father and mother had lots of the 'milk of human kindness' and were always kind to the Negroes.

“Our parents were in their early twenties when the war closed. Father's education was cut short by the war, but mother graduated at the Columbia Female College in those days when it was still a question whether a woman had sense enough to warrant an education or not. My mother, accustomed to slaves all her life, had a hard time making adjustments. She has told us that, as a bride, she gave out a peck of flour for biscuits the first morning.

“My father owned a plantation in Fairfield County and carried my mother there as a bride. The lands were fertile. Everything in plant and animal life could be raised on it. The scenery was charming and varied. But there were rocks and hills galore, and farming was

expensive. Father's other brothers had homes in Richland County, and they persuaded him to move near them. Some sort of an exchange was worked out between father and the farmer in Richland. I don't think any money was exchanged.

“Six of their twelve children, however, were born in Fairfield, and we older children started to school there. I can see the little old schoolhouse now down in the 25 acre pasture, so far from home that mother always sent a Negro nurse with us to protect us from the rams, built, and boars, should they become vicious. Other children came to the school, and the patrons paid the salaries of the teachers, who usaully lived in the community.

“After we moved to Lykesland, father was delighted with his new place and soon became a pioneer in progressive methods of farming. He made terraces to 8 prevent soil erosion, rotated his crops, and secured registered breeds of stock and cattle. The task of rearing that big family must have been a staggering one to them. Mother was never very strong and always stayed in the background, interested in making a home rather than a living. But she was the source of inspiration and courage to the rest of us, the real power behind the throne. A prolonged illness, and she left us at the age of forty-five.”

With the quick motion and easy grace that characterizes her every movement, Miss Sadie moved over to the built-in book shelves and returned with the family Bible. The covers were dog-eared and worn; the pages were ragged, misplaced, and yellow with age. “What a good time we children have had reading these Bible stories in the preface. Mother would make us wash our hands so clean they would bear inspection. Then she'd seat us in the middle of the floor, with this Bible in the midst of us. How we loved these stories with the colored illustrations. She was one woman who didn't think it was too holy for the children to enjoy.” At the bottom of the page, where the important records of the family were kept, those words were scrawled in a child's handwriting: “Victor colt born August 19, 1891 written by Pete.”

“You know Pete's married? Oh, yes, he's been married six years. Married the head nurse at O'teen. That's the Federal TB sanatorium at Asheville, you know. Jane is a lovely girl. We're all very fond of her. For the two years that Pete was a patient and she his nurse, they were in love. They wrote each other every day, and occasionally Jane, accompanied by another nurse, would drop in to visit Pete during off hours. But the marriage was a complete surprise to everybody. At first, we thought it was very unwise, but Pete argued that if Jane were going to nurse TB patients 9 all her life, she just as well nurse him, and both of them could have companionship and a home. Jane makes a good salary, about $150 and her board, and she takes excellent care of Pete. As attractive as ever? Well, we think so, and there are frequent discussions among their friends as to which is the better looking, Pete or Marvin. Pete has tried raising chickens and hogs, but he has to go back to bed every time he exercises much, and he says he's writing a book now when he has to stay in bed. He's one of the many tragedies of the World War. He and Ned grew to be real friends.”

“Ned? Who is Ned?” I asked while she carefully replaced the precious old book in its place on the self.

“Lawsy me, I thought I told you about Ned. Didn't I ever tell you that Ned is sort of an adopted member of the family? You've seen our new brick parsonage? Several years ago, we were about to lose it because of a $600-debt; so we women decided to sell meals at the State Fair to make some money. We worked ourselves nearly to death, but we had lots of fun, and paid the $600-debt. This lad, Ned, took his meals with us, and he was such an attractive chap we all enjoyed him. A few days after the fair closed, in walked Ned one morning. 'You told me if I ever needed a friend, I could count on you,' he said. I've lost my job. I want a friend; so I've come to you.'

“That was a problem. We didn't know what in the world to do with Ned. We had no guest room at that time, and Bert drew the line on sharing his room with this questionable stranger from Canada, who had been traveling with the aquaplane. But something had to

be done. Ned had no clothes, no food, no money, no home. So we put up an extra bed on the back porch and made him welcome to all we had. When the first rain came a few days later, ye 10 gods, the porch leaked so in the middle of the night that Ned couldn't stay out there at all; so Bert called him into his quarters. Bert never expresses any emotions, as you know, but we had observed with interest how Ned was growing in his favor. The whole family fell for Ned. Christine came for a visit. Christine is our oldest sister, Mrs. L. C. Carroll, at Winnsboro, you know. Well, she and Ned read French plays together. He followed Bert around like a shadow and helped with the work whenever he was needed. It was too funny to see him coming from the field one afternoon on the bare back of a mule, and the mule running as fast as she could. The mule ran straight to her stall, and Ned was thrown against a stump. We were petrified with fear. Ned lay lifeless; we were sure he had been killed. Finally Bert came in from his work, and we carried Ned into the house. After several days in bed, he was out again and seemed O.K. There were no bad effects.

“After about eight months, Ned said one day, 'Well, I got to go. I've got a brother somewhere and I got to go find him.' We shared what money we had with him, and Bert gave him some extra clothes and took him nearly to Camden.”

The Pattons have always kept open house. Their father provided everything for the table in abundance, and their friends marveled that the “loaves and fishes” were always “multiplied” on Sunday to meet the needs of dozens of guests who went home with them from church.

During most of the day, Martha had sat quietly. She slipped from the room, and Marvin remarked, “She's gone now to see that everything has been done just right. She's worth her weight in gold. When she was a little thing, she used to tell us, 'I'm the chicken of the blue hen.'”

“Have you seen my swallow's nest?” Bert asked, as he carefully lifted a nest from the mantelpiece. “One day last summer, Sadie heard an unusual noise here. Finally she located it in the fireplace. The nest has fallen from the chimney, and there were four babies in it. It seems to me to be a piece of perfect art. I never let anybody destroy a bird's nest on this place, so we put the little birds in a sparrow's nest under the eaves of the front porch. And do you know that sparrow fed them just like she did her own birdies?”

“Do the red birds and mocking birds still come to the front porch and sit on the backs of the rockers and sing?”

“Oh, yes. A mocking bird was there the last warm day we had.”

“Bert, take 'em out in the yard to see your cats, dogs, and pigs,” Mrs. Patton suggested. Bobbee shared her husband's interest in the pets, although she had been in the family only two years and was thirty-eight years younger than her more matured husband. It was she who told us about the calf that had been accidently cut on a nail and how painstakingly they had cared for it till it was well; of her pet pig, a runt, that comes to her window, day or night, whenever she calls, “Honey, come on here.” She also told of the six cats which had been taught to climb a ladder at the first sight of a new bulldog; about the three dogs that had thirty-six puppies at the same time and every one of them had to be killed because one of the mothers developed rabies; and of Mr. Woo, the very smartest dog she had ever seen. She had actually taught him to turn the electric light on and off.

“What's this thing that looks like a cage?” I asked.

“Oh, that's a pen I made for a hawk last spring.” Bert replied. “The darned thing kept eating my red biddies, and I just had to shoot him. He 12 fell with a broken wing. I got sorry, bound up the wing, and cared for him till he was well. I thought, of course, he'd be appreciative of the favor; but instead, he brought in all his friends and neighbors in the fall when they wanted delicacies, and I had to kill him after all.

“How long have I been keeping chickens? Ever since I can remember. We keep our reds here in this run and our white leghorns over yonder in the rear of the yard. We like eggs, and those leghorns keep us supplied. Haven't bought three dozen eggs in two years. I'd say we've sold $75 worth of chickens and eggs, together, and we eat chicken whenever we want it.

“Bert, let's show her our prize hog,” Bobbee insisted.

“This is the hen that lays our golden eggs,” Bert said, as he showed us this fine hog. We keep her in a separate pen from the other hogs. She's Duroc Jersey, and was an unusual buy for five dollars. In three years, I've sold $450 worth of pigs, and the up-keep hasn't been so much.

I'm not much of a cotton farmer. Fact is, I haven't been much interested in farming till the last few years. My job has been to carry the mail for Uncle Sam. When my mother died, our struggle began in earnest. She was ill for several years, and father kept borrowing a little money on the home place so he could make ends meet. The oldest child, Christine, had just finished Columbia Female College. She looked after housekeeping, cared for us children, and taught school over there at Smith's school. With her salary of $35 a month, she helped to send Marvin to Spartanburg for a business course, hoping he could help out with our finances. But his health failed, and for a education of the other children, each one helping with every other one. My, we had a hard time.”

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“No such thing, Bert,” said Miss Sadie. “We've always been happy. and sacrifice is part of the joy of having a big family and sharing with one another. It was no sacrifice for me to leave home and work as matron at Columbia Female College for two years, so that my salary of $50 a month might be applied to the education of the two younger children. And it was a pleasure for me to rent a house for $15 a month and take six boarders at $25 each,

in order for Mary to get college training. Shucks, that's an interesting part of the game. I get a big thrill out of my part of the sacrifice, if that's what you want to call it."

"Well," Bert took up his story again, "I saw where things were headed; so when I had a chance at the small job, I took it. I was about twenty-five. At first, I had only eighteen miles, and my salary was $51. For a few years I used two horses. The roads were terrible, and sometimes I had to get a mule to pull me out of the mud. When the roads improved and my route increased to thirty miles, I used a car. I've bought seventeen Chevrolets, and I believe my car expense has been $400 a year. I reckon I've put $7,000 in these cars. But I was well paid - my salary went to $175 a month - and I should have saved money. There have been many and unusual demands on me, however. I've been retired five years now, at a salary of $96 a month. I consider Uncle Sam a pretty good fellow to work for.

"The loss of our home was a staggering blow to us all. Father died suddenly in 1915. The mortgage on the place kept growing with the years. The World War came on. Camp Jackson was being built, and labor went to six dollars a day, and we couldn't compete with that sort of price. Later, the boll weevil and the depression hit us. We had been offered $40,000 for the place, but when the showdown came, we couldn't raise the $15,000 we had borrowed on 14 it, and so it had to go."

"Lets's forget it," Marvin said. "I've prayed day and night that I never could think of it again. It's the worst kind of nightmare to me." "And the saddest day of my life," Sadie added, "was when I left my home." And together they walked off in the direction of the barn.

"We moved over to the Brooks Place," Bert continued, "and Sadie nursed an old couple to help pay the rent. After three years, we tried another farm, hoping we could do better. In the meantime, the doctor found I had diabetes and other complications, and I've been on a strict diet ever since. He ordered rest in a hospital, but somebody in the family had to carry on, and I couldn't stop. We came here three years ago. I pay $350 rent and have 50 acres. I'm allowed to plant fifteen acres in cotton. Last year the boll weevil got all the cotton in this

section. I only made six bales, and I usually make a bale to the acre. I doubt if we clear $10 per bale anyway; so I'm depending more and more on other things to supplement my salary and to pay for the privilege of planting a crop. I pay 70 cents a day for labor and own my stock and plows, and so forth.

“You have observed I haven't known anything much about the cost of things. We have never bothered with that side of it much; we've been too careless, I realize. But Bobbee is a good business woman, and together we're already working on a budget for this year. Come back a year from now, and I'll be well versed in these figures. The sunshine is not so warm now; maybe we had better go to the fire.”

“What do you all know about Christine these days?” Marvin asked. “I've felt all day that they would drive up here this afternoon. I sold Mr. Connor a suit of clothes the other day, and he said neither of them is very well these 15 days. He told me some kind of cock-and-bull story about their not coming up here any oftener. They are both crazy about those boys of J.W.'s. That's Christie's third family to raise, isn't it? After mother's death, she was a mother and a teacher to us children. When we got from under her wing, I guess, like Napoleon, she wanted another family to conquer; so she finally consented to marry Mr. Conner, and his seven children become her charge. Now, since J. W.'s death, she has these two grandchildren. My, we could hardly live through the rearing of our four. She's done a good job, too. Out of the Connor children, she's made a distinguished Methodist preacher, a capable school superintendent, and two excellent school teachers. She entered the schoolroom for the second time and put her salary into their education. A darned good record for a stepmother, I'd say.”

Miss Sadie then told us about Susan, who married a widower. “She and Brother Saxon didn't get home for Christmas, but Susan sent me and Martha a lovely coat apiece. Susan hasn't lost her sense of humor, and it relieves many tense situations in that Methodist parsonage. Her sarcasm sometimes hurts the sensitive parishioners, I imagine; but

she's charming and handsome, and Mr. Saxon is devoted to her. She and Mary were so congenial. Somehow none of us can get over Mary's untimely death."

"Before it gets any later, Bobbee, let's take the folks for a ride and show'em the changes they're making in the road," our thoughtful host suggested. "This road will be a beauty when it's finished. Quite a difference between this one and the one I first rode the mail over."

"We're coming now to the church and to the place where we got our 'learning,' said Miss Sadie. An ancestor of mother's gave this land and some gold money to build a Methodist church and a school near this creek. You see the new 16 highway will divide the church from the cemetery. Some folks are disgruntled over that.

"When father first came to this community, the first Sunday we were here, dressed in our best bib an' tucker, we all came to this church. I recall we came, eight strong, in a double-seated open vehicle, driving a mule and a horse, Beck and Annie, with Annie's colt running along under the shaft."

"Excuse me, Sade," Marvin interrupted, "is that the Sunday I had to wear one of the girl's aprons which you turned 'round and buttoned in front for a shirt? I can see those buttons now, sewed all 'round the waist for me to fasten my pants to. No boy was ever so sinned against. I'll resent it till my dying day."

"Well, there wasn't anything else to do. You didn't have a clean one, Marvin, and you know as well as I do that there was no excuse father would accept for not going to church. I think you should congratulate us on our ingenuity.

"Father was made Sunday School superintendent that very day, and he held the position for twenty-five years. He was superintendent in Fairfield, and a steward in three churches. Brent has taken his place as steward in our church now. Father gave a lot of time to temperance work, also. Here's the Horrell Hill School where four children were killed in the

tornado several years ago. There were, I think, about fifteen people killed in the community at the same time. This lovely new brick building took the place of the old one. Progress often follows in the wake of disaster." "Now you can see what lovely broad acres lie along this road," Marvin remarked. Originally all those plantations were owned by father and his 17 brothers and my wife's father and his brothers.

"I recall one year father made a bumper crop out here without spending a cent for commercial fertilizer. These folks are new enough to Columbia to enjoy the good things the city had to offer, and they have telephones, electricity, and water. This highway will enhance the value of the property, too. Those folks have been offered $600 [?] more for some of his land, but they are holding it for $1,000. Better take us home now, Bobbee. Bert can't stay away from home after dark."

We passed by the Negro quarters. Dick ran out to the road and said, "Cap'n Bert, whar you gwine? Leeme go wid you, Cap'n Bert. Us done fed up de mules an' de hawgs an' milked de cows. Lemme go wid you, please, sir."

"You can't go this time, Dick. Tell your daddy to look after things till I get back."

"This is the place where I beat my husband farming last year," Mrs. Patton said proudly. "He gave me an acre in here, and I made two bales on it. He didn't make but one on his best land. Right here below the Veterans' Hospital is the place I've picked out for our new home. We don't want but ten acres either, with a brick bungalow on it. Oh, yes, we're working on the house plans. Haven't done anything else since Christmas. It may be only our dream house, but I am hoping not.

"When we have our own place, we're going to do truck farming. We plan to put out strawberries, raspberries, and [?] the first year. Then gradually we'll get our peach and apple and [?] orchard planted; oh, yes, a vineyard, too. We'll have red chickens for food and white leghorns for laying eggs, That's as far as I'm going, but Bert says [??] to raise hogs and livestock. Of course, I'm expecting him to raise [??] for 18 everything we have.

Library of Congress

We hope the hospital will furnish a market for our produce, but if it doesn't, we'll have the curb market to fall back on. I believe it will beat planting cotton.”